

Found Poem Samples

Examples from the Bintel Brief

Migrations

Composed from letters dated 1906-1939

I am a workingman from Bialystok from Minsk from Russia
Deserters from armies from families scattered across oceans
We came to America with empty hands and heavy hearts
We are all making a new life piece by piece breath by breath

Longing

Composed from letters of separation and hope

My beloved home my heart is heavy for parents I left behind
I am powerless a coward who wants to run back
But I must serve *Fonie* in the new land
My conscience speaks: *Just look at your workers pale and thin beaten*

Language of Survival

Composed from letters about language and identity

We five brothers always speak English to each other but they speak only Yiddish
Not among strangers but to us and even to our American friends
A stubborn quarrel goes on between our parents and ourselves

Threads of Resilience

Composed from various immigrant voices

I go to school where I do very well though times are hard
My father earned five dollars this week I want to help to study to become something more

The hunger for education was very great among immigrants

Imagine: *a little fresh air a moment of hope in a new world*

Reflection:

The goal was to capture the collective immigrant experience by weaving together fragments from different letters in the Bintel Brief collection. Each poem draws words and phrases directly from the original text, creating a kind of collaborative narrative that reveals shared emotional landscapes.

In "Migrations," I pulled phrases that speak to displacement and movement, highlighting how immigrants were often forced to leave their homes, separated from families, and seeking new beginnings. The fragmented layout mirrors the fragmented experience of migration.

"Longing" explores the emotional tension between leaving and wanting to return, using direct quotes that reveal the deep pain of separation and the struggle to find meaning in a new place. The phrase about workers being "pale and thin" connects personal struggle to broader economic challenges.

"Language of Survival" addresses the generational conflicts around language and identity. It uses verbatim text to show how language became a battleground for cultural preservation and assimilation, with children and parents navigating different relationships to English and Yiddish.

"Threads of Resilience" focuses on hope and aspiration, particularly through education. It captures the universal immigrant dream of improvement, using phrases that show both hardship and optimism.

The poems aim to do more than just tell individual stories. They create a collective voice that speaks to:

- The universal experience of migration
- Struggles with identity and assimilation
- Hope and resilience in the face of challenge
- The emotional complexity of leaving home

By using only words from the original letters, the poems maintain authenticity while creating a more poetic, reflective narrative that transcends any single immigrant's experience.

Poems Drawn From the Bintel Brief and the Poetry of Angel Island

Crossings: Echoes of Detention and Hope

Parallels of Confinement

From Angel Island and Ellis Island

We came with dreams gold gathered hopes pressed between palms

Waves of longing mountains of separation laws that crush like stones

America: *lofty buildings wooden prisons barbarian justice*

Voices Behind Walls

Tears are universal choking at farewells silence echoing

Parents left behind Wives mourned Ambitions suspended

Who was to know a journey of tears would lead to this?

Divergent Constraints

Jewish letters whisper: We work We struggle We persist

Angel Island poems cry: Oppression Exclusion Rage unspoken

Shared Humanity

Detentions differ But hope sounds the same: *One day Success Redemption*

Grief winds like fog Insects chirp Windows frame longing

We will remember This chapter This moment This crossing

Reflection: When I began crafting the found poems about immigrant experiences, I felt like a curator carefully selecting fragments of human stories, each word a delicate artifact of hope and struggle. The source documents - poems etched on the walls of Angel Island and letters from the Bintel Brief - were more than historical records. They were intimate whispers of human resilience.

My approach was deeply personal and almost archaeological. I imagined myself sorting through fragments of memory, listening for the universal rhythms beneath individual experiences. Each phrase I selected was like a piece of a mosaic, seemingly disconnected but ultimately revealing a larger, more complex picture of migration.

I started by immersing myself in the texts, reading not just with my eyes but with my heart. The Angel Island poems, carved into wooden walls by Chinese immigrants detained in isolation,

spoke of a profound sense of longing and constraint. The Bintel Brief letters from Jewish immigrants revealed similar themes of separation, hope, and the delicate balance between preserving one's identity and adapting to a new world.

The poems emerged almost like musical compositions. I wanted the white space between words to speak as loudly as the words themselves. The fragmented lines mirror the fragmented experiences of people torn from their homes, suspended between what was and what might be. When I placed a Jewish immigrant's whisper of "We work" next to an Angel Island poet's cry of "Oppression," I was creating a conversation across different immigrant experiences.

Italicization became a way of honoring the original voices. Those direct quotations are like spotlights, drawing attention to the raw, unfiltered emotions of people who had experienced profound displacement. The repetition of words like "hope" and "remember" became a kind of incantation, a way of transforming individual suffering into collective resilience.

More than anything, I wanted these poems to challenge the idea of migration as a simple narrative of arrival and assimilation. Migration is a complex emotional journey - a continuous negotiation between loss and possibility, between remembering and becoming.

When I wrote "We will remember / This chapter / This moment / This crossing," I was acknowledging that every migration story is both deeply personal and part of a larger human story of movement, adaptation, and hope.

The poems are an invitation - to listen, to empathize, to recognize our shared humanity across different experiences of movement and transformation.